The Humanist Pulpit

Series IX Number 10

The Road to Tolerance

A Platform Review of Mr. Van Loon's recent book "Tolerance"

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Price Ten Cents

The First Unitarian Society,
803 LaSalle Avenue,
Minneapolis, Minn.

This pamphlet contains an address delivered in the Garrick Theater before the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, at its regular Sunday morning meeting, February 7, 1926, by the minister, John H. Dietrich, and is published for the purpose of reaching those people who are in sympathy with our work but are unable to attend our meetings.

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One address is published each month from September to June, and subscriptions for the annual series (ten in number) are received at one dollar, postpaid. If in addition the Sunday morning programs are desired, the subscription price for the two (addresses and programs) is two dollars. Address the Secretary, First Unitarian Society, 803 LaSalle Avenue, Minneapolis, Minn.

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The Road to Tolerance

We are all more or less familiar with the history of intolerance, of the part it has played in the social, political, and religious life of man. We know that it is a chronic malady of human life, which breaks out in acute form at certain times—when something in man's environment stimulates or inflames his intolerant tendency. When the conditions which bring about these acute forms of intolerance, such as a great war, are removed, the hysteria subsides. But the occasional outbreaks are proofs of the universal presence of the malady. It is now a well recognized fact in disease, whether organic or mental, that the abnormal and excessive are but exaggerations and perversions of the usual course of things. They do not exist by themselves; but represent the temporary and exaggerated functioning of physical and mental processes; and so when we read of a Nero persecuting the Christians, a John Calvin burning Servetus, a Torquemada torturing heretics, or an Attorney General Palmer deporting and imprisoning radicals, we realize that such instances merely furnish an overcharged and somewhat grotesque instance of man's natural and impulsive way of dealing with social, political and religious problems. In short, intolerance is with us always as a natural human impulse; it breaks out in hysterical and grotesque forms in times of stress and danger.

During that long period of political peace and religious indifference preceding the last decade, there was very little practise of intolerance because the disease had subsided. There was nothing in the environment to arouse the disease. The symptoms had practically disappeared, with the result that people had thought the disease itself had been conquered, and that the victory for tolerance had been won. The result was that we heard very little about it. It is true that men like Lecky, Robertson, and Bury, came forward in those days with histories of the way in which freedom of thought had been won, but it was considered a purely historical subject; and these stories were read only by those who were interested in historical problems. Then came the war—that vast upheaval of society, in which we all became terribly frightened; and

this fear, as we are to learn today, led straight to the most flagrant forms of intolerance that the world has ever seen. First, during the war, we had sedition acts in every quarter of the globe, for the purpose of suppressing every form of opinion that did not meet the approval of those in authority. Immediately after the war, we had the outbreak of revolutions in which radicals showed themselves to be as intolerant of opposition as the monarchs whom they overthrew. These were followed by reactionary upheavals, such as the Fascisti government in Italy. And now that the disease is inflamed, we find it spreading into its old haunts of race and religion. Jews are again being discriminated against as never before, Catholics are looked upon with suspicion, agnostics and atheists are harassed, and as the climax of it all we have a nation-wide organization, in hood and gown, to give visible form to the spirit of intolerance in all its frightfulness.

The result is that we hear a great deal about tolerance in these days. The liberals, of course, have kept up a steady barrage against intolerance. The movies added their support to the movement when Mr. Griffith, a year or so ago, put on a very gripping picture called "Intolerance," in which he gathered together, and presented in graphic forms, certain outstanding instances of "man's inhumanity to man" throughout the ages. A few months ago, "Tolerance Week" was observed in every part of the land, during which period a great deal of oratory was displayed and much ink used in the interest of tolerance, for practically every city held daily meetings and published tolerance editions of newspapers. The subject was even considered of such importance as to engage the attention of President Coolidge, who recently in Omaha, before the American Legion convention, devoted an address to it. To cap the whole thing then appeared a volume entitled "Tolerance" by Henrik Van Loon, than whom no more popular writer on historical subjects is living today. Mr. Van Loon, you know, is the man, who a few years ago captured the attention of the whole country by his fascinating book, entitled "The Story of Mankind," in which he told in simple and breezy form the whole political struggle in which man has been engaged throughout the ages, in a book of less than 500 pages, and in language that can be understood by school boys and girls. This was followed by his "Story of the Bible"

which did not sell in such large quantities, but which again told in simple and popular style the story of the Jewish people and the early Christians as it is contained in the Bible.

I

And now comes Mr. Van Loon with the third of his popular volumes, in which he contributes to the general propaganda of this period in favor of tolerance. Here he seeks to tell the history of man's struggle for intellectual freedom as in his previous book he told the story of man's struggle for political freedom, only he does not do it quite so well. It is not a well-knit account of man's struggle for freedom of utterance, showing the various steps of progress in this direction, but rather a disconnected group of instances in which thought has been suppressed, and I am of the opinion that unless one is fairly well acquainted with the history of philosophy and the story of man's struggle to think, as told in more thorough books such as those by Lecky and White, and Draper and Robertson and Bury, his enlightenment would not be greatly enhanced by reading "Tolerance." One cannot read this book, however, without gaining a more vivid picture of the outstanding events and figures in the warfare for freedom, because Van Loon has the happy faculty of being able to make history seem less remote. He tells of ancient events and unfamiliar figures in the language of today, so that they become a part of our living experience, and not the unreal happenings of an entirely different time. And for this reason alone, the book should be read by every one who is unable to visualize historical characters as real and vivid personalities. It is true that he may shock your sensibilities at times by his almost slangy phraseology, as when he refers to Socrates "as an exasperating soap-box orator . . . who spent his days arguing with the loafers on the corners of the streets," or to Ulrich Von Hutton as "the town bum extraordinary," but while he thus occasionally sacrifices his dignity to his childish desire to be amusing and smart, on the whole he adds a vivid lustre to these characters and establishes an intimacy nowhere else to be found.

It should be noted also that the book is full of inaccuracies and inconsistencies; but these are of minor importance and should not be overstressed. The book makes no pretensions of scholarship or historical accuracy. If I judge it correctly, Mr. Van Loon had no desire to make a contribution to his-

tory, but rather to stimulate an interest in those noble heroes who gave their efforts, and in many cases their lives, for the truth; and under the circumstances, if the author proves to be entertaining and stimulating, it is not necessary that he be accurate in all his details or complete in all his evidence. And this I am sure that he does. To those who read it, famous names like Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, Arminius, Bruno, Spinoza and Calvin will become fascinating personalities; while Voltaire and Thomas Paine and others will be less execrated because better understood; and any book that accomplishes such a purpose is well worth while, regardless of all the criticism that the historians may launch against it.

The name of the book of course is a misnomer, for it is intolerance and not tolerance, which forms its subject; but if the story of tolerance turns out really to be the history of intolerance, the author is scarcely to be blamed; for one surely could not find enough real tolerance in the world to form the contents of a book of this size, unless he were a peculiarly gifted and imaginative writer. The history of mankind has been one long story of intolerance, of what Burns called "Man's inhumanity to man," and it is the high-spots—the outstanding events—of this story that Van Loon seeks to tell, in a sketchy disconnected way. It is a review of the story of mankind, following a single thread as it winds its way through history; namely, the long fight against custom, convention, religious dogma, and social interests for the expression of convictions born of reason and science. The subtitle, "The story of man's struggle for the right to think" is also a misnomer; no one has ever denied man a right to think, it is the expression of that thought to which men object; and so this book is a story, not of man's right to think, but of his right to publish and defend his thoughts in the face of persecution. But of course thinking and the expression of thought are intimately bound together; for the natural liberty of private thinking is of little value. It is unsatisfactory and even painful, if one is not permitted to communicate his thoughts to others. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to hide thoughts that have any power over the mind. If a man's thinking leads him to call into question ideas and customs which regulate the behavior of those about him, to reject beliefs which they hold, to see better ways of life than those they follow, it is almost impossible for him, if he is con-

vinced of the truth of his reasoning, not to betray that he is different from them and does not share their opinions. And so really the struggle for the right of free speech is practically the same as the struggle for the right of free thought.

Some will be greatly disappointed that our author, except for one or two brief paragraphs, does not discuss the philosophy of tolerance at all. He follows rather the case method, simply citing significant examples, during the whole course of human history, of men who were persecuted for the advancing of new ideas. In fact, the volume is made up of brief biographies of men who struggled in vain against the prejudices of their time. And this he does boldly, but sanely and with discrimination. He omits all the harrowing details of suffering, and passes by all the obscure theological points, wishing, as he puts it, not to drag these old controversies from their graves and thus cause a fresh outbreak of theological fury, but rather to tell our children of certain ideals of intellectual liberty for which some of their ancestors fought at the risk of their lives, and to warn them against that attitude of doctrinary arrogance and cock-sureness which has caused such a terrible lot of suffering during the last two thousand years.

II

With this purpose in mind the book opens with a delightful prologue in the form of a parable which tells the oft repeated story of how men in their ignorance have slain the prophets while a grateful posterity builds monuments in their praise, and which ends with the sentence, "As it was in the beginning, as it is now, and as some day (so we hope) it shall be no longer." Then in the first half of the book, he describes the growth of tolerance among the Greeks and Romans and the development of intolerance among the Christians. He pictures the cruelty and suffering visited upon the noble minded by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Middle Ages. Then the Renaissance and Reformation are treated in unconventional fashion and with considerable insight. The latter half of the book, although no division is indicated, might almost be a separate volume. Tolerance is still the thread upon which the history is strung, but the method of treatment is entirely changed. The chapters now become condensed biographies of the outstanding figures who practically alone dared to face the entire estab-

lished order of society and flout the infallible decrees of the church. And these men from Erasmus and Rabelais to Voltaire and Tom Paine are portrayed in such vivid fashion as to enlist the lasting gratitude of all men. After Paine, "The last hundred years" are hastily disposed of in one inadequate concluding chapter.

This book should be read in particular by all Christians in order that they might know the bloody record which the history of their church has left in its train, that they might realize how Christian supremacy has been won only by imprisoning and torturing, by slaying and burning men who dared to differ with the doctrines of the church. But this is a vain hope, because when the ordinary Christian comes to that point in the text where Mr. Van Loon begins to treat Christian history and finds his estimate of the bible to be "a supposedly holy volume which contains scraps of ill-digested national history, doubtful poems, the inarticulate visions of half-demented prophets and whole chapters devoted to the foulest denunciation of those who for some reason or other were supposed to have incurred the displeasure of one of Asia's many tribal deities," I say when the ordinary Christian with his prejudices in regard to this book reads that part, he will immediately give vent to his intolerance by refusing to read farther, and denouncing the author as an infidel and an enemy of God.

Only occasionally, usually at the beginnings of his chapters, does the author indulge in philosophizing. And here we get some interesting sidelights on this whole subject of tolerance. I shall speak of only a couple of these chapter beginnings. In one of them, he tells us that "the struggle for tolerance is part of the age-old conflict between organized society, which places the continued safety of the group ahead of all other considerations, and those private citizens of unusual intelligence or energy, who hold that such improvement as the world has thus far experienced was invariably due to the efforts of the individual and not due to the efforts of the mass (which by its very nature is distrustful of all innovations), and that therefore the rights of the individual are far more important than those of the mass. If we agree, he says, to accept these premises as true, it follows that the amount of tolerance in any given country must be in direct proportion to the degree of individual liberty enjoyed by the majority of its inhabitants."

At the beginning of another chapter, he speaks about what becomes very evident to one as he reads the book, and that is that the battle for the right to think was never carried on by any considerable group of people, but almost invariably by lone individuals here and there. It was by daring men like Huss and Bruno, like Luther and Erasmus, like Servetus and Arminius, like Voltaire and Paine, who were shocked by the yoke under which the people were forced to exist, and who, burning with a divine fire, rose in revolt. And as the author says, "the vast majority of people never knew that there was any fighting at all. Now and then curiosity may have compelled them to ask who was being burned that morning or who was going to be hanged the next afternoon. Then perhaps they discovered that a few desperate individuals continued to fight for certain principles of freedom of which both Catholics and Protestants disapproved most heartily. But I doubt whether such information affected them beyond the point of mild regret and the comment that it must be very sad for their poor relatives to bear, that uncle had come to such a terrible end."

III

In another place, the author speaks of the causes of intolerance, and here we are confronted by one of his inconsistencies. He tells us that intolerance is like ancient Gaul, divided into three parts: the intolerance of laziness, the intolerance of ignorance, and the intolerance of self-interest. And then at the end, he says that fear is at the bottom of all intolerance. I think, however, that this inconsistency is only apparent, for while intolerance may take these three forms, one will usually find fear to be the ultimate reason for the worst forms of this evil. But to speak for a moment of these forms. The intolerance of laziness, he says, is the most general, and is to be found everywhere and among all classes. It is simply the unwillingness of people to adjust themselves to changed ideas because it requires too much mental effort. It is much easier to adjudge those who differ as the enemies of society. But while this type of intolerance is the most general, it is also the least harmful.

The second variety is much more serious. An ignorant man is a very dangerous man; but when he tries to excuse his ignorance, he becomes a "holy terror," for then he erects within

his soul a granite bulwark of self-righteousness and from the high pinnacle of this formidable fortress, he defies all his enemies, to show cause why they should be allowed to live; and because they live constantly in a state of fear (by virtue of their ignorance) they easily turn to cruelty and love to torture those against whom they have a grievance. And the victims of this delusion bolster up their courage by an imaginary relationship which exists between themselves and the invisible gods, and finally are convinced that their own ideas are the ideas of God, and therefore they could not possibly be mistaken. This is an extremely dangerous form of intolerance because there is no length to which people will not go in doing what they believe to be the will of God.

The third form of intolerance is caused by self-interest. This, says Mr. Van Loon, is as common as the measles. Examples are to be found everywhere. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, and taught that the favor of God was not to be bought by killing oxen and goats, all those who made a living from these sacrifices in the temple (and they were most of the people in Jerusalem) decried him as a dangerous revolutionist and caused him to be executed before he could do any lasting damage to their main source of income. When a few years later Paul came to Ephesus preaching a creed which threatened to interfere with the prosperity of the jewelers who derived their profits from the sale of images, the Guild of the Goldsmiths almost lynched him. And ever since there has been open warfare between those who depend for their livelihood upon some established form of worship or some political doctrine, and those whose ideas threaten to take the crowd away from one temple in favor of another. And so the extermination of heretics becomes frequently a matter of economic necessity or at least economic advantage, and belongs to the intolerance of self-interest.

But, after all, the theme of the whole book is to prove that intolerance is merely the manifestation of the protective instinct of the herd. The life of the individual is so dependent upon the life of the group, that the group and the various individuals in the group, are afraid to let any individual say or do anything that might endanger the protective power of the group. Thus a pack of wolves is intolerant of the wolf that is different and invariably gets rid of this offending individual. A tribe

of cannibals is intolerant of the individual who threatens to provoke the wrath of the gods and bring disaster upon the whole community, and so drives him into the wildernesss. The Greek commonwealth cannot afford to harbor within its sacred walls one who dares to question the very basis of its organization, and so in an outburst of intolerance condemns the offender to drink the poison. The Roman cannot hope to survive if a small group of zealots play fast and loose with laws held indispensable since the days of Romulus, and so is driven into deeds of intolerance. The Church depended in early days for her continued existence upon the absolute obedience of even the humblest of her subjects and is driven to such extremes of suppression and cruelty that many prefer the ruthlessness of the Turk to the charity of the Christian. And in a period of hysterical fear, even we Americans are assured that our government cannot withstand criticism, and so we throw into prison or deport from our shores those who dare offer it. And so it goes throughout the ages until life, which might be a glorious adventure, is turned into a horrible experience, and all this happens, says our author, because human existence so far has been entirely dominated by fear. When this is understood, the solution immediately presents itself; and that is the necessity of getting rid of fear. How can this be done?

Mr. Van Loon confesses his inability to answer that question. He does not despair, he is patient and hopeful that man, who has accomplished so much in character development in the past thousands of years will eventually outgrow fear, but aside from a passing suggestion that knowledge might help in that direction, he does not know the answer. In one place, he puts it this way: "I can show the terrible crimes apparently committed in the name of righteousness and justice but really caused by intolerance. I can depict the unhappy days upon which mankind fell when intolerance was elevated to the rank of one of the major virtues. I can denounce and deride intolerance until my readers shout with one accord 'Down with this curse, and let us be tolerant.' But there is one thing I cannot do. I cannot tell how the highly desirable goal is to be reached. There are handbooks which undertake to give us instruction in everything from after-dinner speaking to ventriloquism; but no one has thus far offered to explain in forty (or in forty thousand) lessons how to be tolerant."

IV

And yet, in spite of courting the contempt of Mr. Van Loon, it is this very thing which I propose to do in the remainder of our time. What is the use of discussing such a subject as Intolerance if we have not at least a suggestion in regard to its cure? And so while I would not presume to prescribe a panacea for this universal malady, while I would not attempt to tell the world how to free itself from the official intolerance of great institutions like church and state, I can and would at least suggest a few things that might contribute to a greater tolerance within our own natures, and thus perhaps ease up the situation at large. We are all, every one of us, subject to this vice, afflicted with this malady, and there are certain things which will help us to be more tolerant and less intolerant than we have been in the past. And the cure I would prescribe is founded upon the causes suggested by our author. While he tells us that fear is the one fundamental cause, he suggests other causes at various places in the book, causes such as ignorance and arrogance, too serious a conception of one self and a lack of faith in one's cause. And it is on the basis of these that I would suggest certain ways of overcoming our intolerance.

And the first thing I would suggest, if we are ever to become tolerant, is Knowledge. If intolerance is born of fear, it is conceived of ignorance. The intolerant man is always an ignorant man, at least in the sense in which I use the word knowledge. I use it in the sense of so broad an acquaintance with things as they are as to give one complete understanding. The French have a proverb that "to know everything is to forgive everything" and here knowing is identified with the thought of understanding. I venture to say that nine-tenths of the intolerance as it expresses itself in race prejudice and religious bigotry and social snobbery is due to our inability to understand and thus to put ourselves in the place of others who have a different racial and social and religious heritage and tradition. If an American does not like an Englishman, or a Gentile a Jew, or a Protestant a Catholic, it is because he does not know these people. He fails to understand the heritage with which he is equipped and the environment in which he lives, which cause him to be different. And the only cure for this dislike is a broad and inclusive knowledge.

The ignorant man lives in a very narrow world. He is familiar with only a single set of ideas—those which have been handed down to him by his parents, and rigidly taught at home or at church—and these ideas he fondly imagines are the correct ones upon which the very structure of society rests. And when he encounters an idea which is the direct opposite of these, he imagines society or religion is tumbling to pieces, and forthwith seeks to annihilate it. On the other hand, the educated man lives in a growing and expanding world, and has no such illusions about the correctness of traditional ideas. He is accustomed to ever meeting new ideas, and welcomes them as factors in his widening experience. By this very fact, he is able to put himself in the other man's place, and feel that if he had been born and bred in precisely the same circumstances, he would probably hold those same ideas. Thus he becomes tolerant of whatever may come along. And the degree of his tolerance is usually measured by the extent of his knowledge.

Not only that, but the fear of which Mr. Van Loon speaks as the basis of all intolerance is born of ignorance. Only ignorant people are afraid. Nine-tenths of the things which people fear do not actually exist. The child is afraid in the dark, because it does not know what is in the dark, and its imagination fills it with all kinds of monsters and terrors. Let the child understand that things are the same in the dark as in the light, and there is no more fear of the dark. And so the ignorant man fills the future with all kinds of threatening forms and scowling faces because he does not know the past or the actual conditions of the present. And when some one comes along and tells him that these things do not actually exist, and that the means which he uses to avoid them are therefore unnecessary, he feels that his future and that of the world is endangered. And so the first cure of intolerance is education; for he who knows all fears nothing.

And the second cure for intolerance is that which is born of knowledge—Modesty. Ignorance gives birth to narrowness and pride. The ignorant man knows nothing beyond his own prejudices and superstitions, and these he uses as the measure of all truth. He does not know enough to know that he may be wrong; and so he dares to lay down the law for other men, and punish them for non-conformity. Or arrogance may be the result of education along only one line, as illus-

trated by the orthodox theologian who knows everything that it is necessary for him to know for man's salvation. To him has been revealed the mind and heart of God. Last Sunday, a nearby Presbyterian minister preached on the subject, "The Ache in God's Heart." Here indeed is perfect arrogance. And, of course, any one who knows God well enough to know the ache in his heart is confident that any one who disagrees with him, disagrees also with God. No arrogance can equal that of the man who believes in special and personal revelation; and this leads to intolerance of the most bitter type, as illustrated in the history of Christianity. It organized the inquisition, burned Servetus at the stake, executed Bruno in the public square and drove Roger Williams into the wilderness. And today it has unfrocked Bishop Brown, hounded Dr. Fosdick from his pulpit, and driven dozens of university professors from their chairs, for as Glenn Frank said a few days ago, in speaking of the dismissal of teachers, "We no longer burn our heretics, we fire them." How different is the man who has opened his mind and let in the light from every quarter, the man who seeks to learn all that life has to offer, with no case to defend and no thesis to prove. And as his knowledge increases, he becomes conscious of his limitations as measured against the background of infinity, and finally he reaches that summit of all knowledge so beautifully described by Socrates, when he said, "As for me, all I know is that I know nothing." That is real modesty which is the condition of tolerance. No man with such a spirit could ever punish or even silence those who disagree with him.

Another thing that will help us to be more tolerant is a faith in truth, and its ability to prevail. If we hold only to those things which we actually believe to be true, we need have no fear as to their final triumph. The intolerance of people is a standing witness to their lack of faith in themselves and to the ideas which they hold. They are afraid to let their opponents speak, lest everything they stand for go to pieces. They are intolerant because they are afraid that in a fair fight, they will be defeated. Every intolerant man is at bottom a man who distrusts himself and the truth of what he claims to believe. The greatest indictment against the truth of Christianity is the fact that it seeks to prevent its adherents from reading books which oppose it. The Roman Catholic church

places all such books upon the "index" and makes it a mortal sin for a member of the church to read them; Protestant ministers are constantly telling their people not to read certain books in criticism of Christianity lest their faith be destroyed, and the more orthodox are seeking even by legislation to prevent the teaching of science because it is undermining the doctrines of Christianity. Could there be a greater confession of the error of their religion than this? If Christianity be true, all the criticism in the world cannot harm it, and all the science in the world cannot undermine it. If it be true, science will merely substantiate it. I have never yet found the Christian minister, who in order to strengthen his position, invites people to read criticisms of his religion.

And it is this lack of faith in the cause for which they stand that gives rise to intolerance. The inquisitors of the middle ages were tortured and burned because they had themselves lost faith in the truth of the Catholic revelation. John Calvin kindled the flames that crispened the flesh of Servetus into blackness, because he himself had lost faith in the truth of his dogmas, and so feared the teachings of Servetus. The Fundamentalists today are hounding the liberals from their pulpits, because, like the liberals, they no longer believe in their hearts that their creeds are true. The patriots who are so busy in hunting reds in this country, and who a few years ago engaged themselves in throwing them into prison or shipping them from our shores, are all of them men who at bottom have no confidence in democracy. If they had sufficient confidence, what would the agitation of a few thousand scattered radicals hurt? The bigot is always a man who seeks to suppress his antagonist because he fears in his heart that his antagonist is right. Therefore, I recommend that the moment you begin to feel the desire to suppress those who differ with you, it is time to examine carefully the content of your own beliefs.

On the other hand, the man who espouses only that, which he knows to be the truth, has no fear of the man who differs. Why? Because he is interested only in the truth, and if the other man's position proves in the end to be the truth, then he simply surrenders his former opinion and accepts that of his adversary. Therefore, he is perfectly willing that error should speak as loudly and freely as it desires, for he knows that in the end it cannot prevail against the truth. "If there is any-

It is the custom to publish Mr. Dietrich's addresses in a series of ten numbers during the church year, one address each month being selected for that purpose. Many of these are out of print, but the titles listed below are still available and may be obtained by application in person or by mail to The Publication Committee, 803 LaSalle Ave., Minneapolis, at the price of 10 cents per copy.

The Business of a Church in These Days.
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